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The Identity and Role of James in Acts - A Historical and Literary Analysis

Ojala, L.S.

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The James of Acts 12:17; 15:13 and 21:18 is usually identified as James the brother of the Lord. This conclusion does not arise from Luke-Acts because the author does not name any of the brothers of the Lord. Rather, the conclusion is “imported” from the epistle to the Galatians, where a reference to “James the brother of the Lord” can be found (Gal 1:19).

This dissertation re-examines the James of Acts 12:17; 15:13 and 21:18 first and foremost in light of the literary and narrative conventions of the author of Luke-Acts (Part One). The central verse is Acts 12:17 where James is mentioned in passing, but without clarification as to which James is meant. In light of the author’s conventions of introducing new characters, as well as distinguishing characters of the same name, we conclude that the James of Acts 12:17 should be identified as James of Alphaeus who is explicitly named as one of the twelve apostles in Acts 1:13. This identification results in a better internal narrative coherence as does the identification of James as the brother of the Lord.

This identification, as well as the resulting Luke-Acts portrait of James of Alphaeus, is compared to other NT literature, and to second and early third Century Christian literature for historical verification (Part Two). We find no compelling evidence to render the identification of James in Acts as the son of Alphaeus historically implausible.